DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 350 968 HE 025 947

AUTHOR Robinson, Jennifer
TITLE International Students and American University Culture: Adjustment Issues.
PUB DATE 16 Oct 92
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Washington Area Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (WATESOL) Annual Convention (Arlington, VA, October 16, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Context; *Cultural Differences; Cultural Traits; Democratic Values; *Educational Environment; *Educational Practices; *Foreign Students; *Higher Education; Intercultural Communication; Social Values; Student Adjustment; *Values
IDENTIFIERS *United States

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses two types of adjustments that foreign students face when they encounter university culture in the United States. The central section lists and describes four key groups of underlying principles, values, and practices in American education and discusses the reasons why these may be difficult for foreign students to understand. A discussion of the role of the first group, "individualism and competition," and its influence on grading and classroom interaction and learning notes that these qualities may be difficult for students from cultures that emphasize the group over individual experience. The prevalence of attitudes from the second group, "equality and informality" on U.S. campuses is discussed next, with attention to the way these values influence personal relations. The third group is "pragmatism and reasoning style," and it is pointed out that the U.S. emphasis on practicality and directness inclines American students toward "doing" rather than "being," and make them time- rather than process-oriented. These qualities also form American notions of learning as an open-ended pursuit in which both teachers and students are engaged and in which critical thinking skills are valued, ideas which may be difficult for students with strong oral traditions that place a high value on memorization as a key learning tool. The final value group has to do with the U.S. philosophy of education, which may introduce problems with plagiarism and concepts of knowledge ownership, as well as with the view that the final function of education is to produce well-rounded citizens. The paper closes by discussing implications for teaching and suggests seven possible classroom activities for teaching American culture. Contains 27 references. (JB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

International Students and American University Culture: Adjustment Issues

Jennifer Robinson
October 16, 1992
Paper presented at the
WATESOL Annual Convention

ED350968

HE 025 947

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Jennifer Robinson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☑ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

 BEST COPY AVAILABLE

International Students and American University Culture: Adjustment Issues

Jennifer Robinson
October 16, 1992
Paper presented at the
WATESOL Annual Convention

Let us take a walk in an international student's shoes for a while. Having left the secure social support of friends and family and the familiarity of native language and culture, our student arrives in the United States to begin studies at a large American university. Perhaps for the first time in her life, she copes with multi-dimensional stress alone, without friends or family to rely upon (Westwood and Barker, 1990). While learning to navigate around a large, complex university environs and/or the surrounding town or city, our student may encounter any number of basic difficulties such as visa or paperwork problems, financial delays or difficulties, or lack of or complications with living arrangements. She has also to deal with selecting and registering for courses within the university system, which may be new (Althen, 1983).

In resolving any one of these problems, she also has to deal with an array of people. The relationships with such persons are important and all have the potential for downfall. She may, for example, expect too much or too little from the international student advisor (Charles and Stewart, 1991). She may expect the advisor to solve housing or financial problems. An early mistake or negative first impression could have serious academic repercussions later down the road (Westwood and Barker, 1990).

Our student must also make a language adjustment. She may

discover that although her English is adequate enough to pass university English entrance requirements, she lacks specialized English skills in her major or particular area of study. Her prior experience with the language may not have prepared her in all skill areas for performing academic tasks (e.g. taking notes, writing lab reports) (Fletcher and Stren, 1989; Ostler, 1980). Or she has an accent that is not easily comprehended by Americans (Heinkinheimo and Shute, 1986). Opportunities to develop sociolingusitic skills in English prior to arrival in the U.S. may have been limited for our student. Hence, she might also find that somehow she is subtly not communicating well or easily with others, unintentionally making the wrong impression. Additionally, once surrounded by the language, she may lose self-confidence in using English both socially and academically (Xu, 1991).

In coping with these difficulties, she may immerse herself in academic work (Heinkinheimo and Shute, 1986). She may also seek the comfort of a niche of others from her home country (Storti, 1991). But assuming that our student has weathered these first social, emotional and language adjustments, what happens when she begins to take classes? In other words, even if our student has survived the initial transitions to American university life, the real challenge lies when she begins her studies, for she encounters American university culture. Essentially, international students attending U.S. universities are faced with adjusting to a culture within a culture: American academe.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the cultural

differences and difficulties international students may experience in their adjustment to American university culture. The aim is not so much to place the burden of adjustment on international students to their environment, but rather to suggest that an awareness of the cultural rules of American university culture on the part of students, teachers and administrators can help empower these students to take a more active role in their academic pursuits.

American University Culture

Hirsch (1987) argued that American youth lack "cultural literacy" or a certain body of shared knowledge in literate American discourse. A culturally literate person, according to Hirsch, is an individual able to connect spoken or written utterances with a larger cultural and historical context. One becomes culturally literate not so much to believe and agree with the ideas and the giants of Western thought, but to have a basic, shared context within which to discuss salient issues of the day with others.

While Hirsch claims that American youth are not culturally literate, American college youth <u>are</u> aware, if unconsciously, of the underlying principles, values and practices in American education. American students and teachers share certain unstated values, assumptions and expectations about classroom behavior and practice. We can define "American University Cultural Literacy" as the knowledge (conscious or unconscious) of the underlying assumptions and values about education and the world at large that underscore practices at American universities. The problem for

international students is that often the assumed knowledge or context is implicit rather than explicit. In a sense, then, they need to become "culturally literate". Again, the argument for becoming culturally literate is not that of conformity, but rather empowerment.

Some Cultural Values and Assumptions of American Academe

To facilitate this discussion, four main groups of values typically ascribed to American culture have been distinguished. These values for the most part are representative white, male European-American culture, which has been a dominant force throughout American educational history. This list is not exhaustive, rather it is meant to structure this description, if superficially (see Table 1).

1. Individualism and Competition

Individualism and competition are values often attributed to Americans. In the classroom, these values are played out in the grading system, the emphasis on independent learning and thinking and individual responsibility.

To encourage competition between individual students, teachers often grade on a percentile curve, i.e., it is not usually possible for the entire class to get an "A" on an exam (Althen, 1988). This system is seen as a way to motivate individuals to do their best. Competitiveness in the classroom may be different for students coming from cultures in which emphasis is placed on the group rather than the individual or in which classes are not graded on a percentile curve. For example, in Soviet academic culture, it is

TABLE 1:

Some Values in and Examples of American Academic Culture

Values	Manifestations
Individualism & Competition	*Grading on Percentile Curve *Independent Work *Individual Responsibility *Cheating
Equality & Informality	*Access to Education *Grading and Assessment *Teacher-Student Relationship *Social Status
Pragmatism & Reasoning Style	*The "Point" in Discourse *Practical Applications *Critical Thinking Skills *Active Participation *Time Orientation
Philosophy of Knowledge	*Plagiarism *University Coursework

possible for all or none of the students to get an "A" on an exam (K. Ogorodnikova[1], personal communication, October, 1992).

American students are also expected to learn and think independently. As one ascends up the scale of American higher education, the amount of individual library work, solitary research and writing increases, requiring students to work independently and budget their time, a new task for many international students (N. Liakos[2], personal communication, March 25, 1992). Undergraduate international students in one study felt that "thinking independently" would be the most difficult part of adjusting to American university work (Carter and Sedlacek, 1986).

Additionally, American students are to be responsible for themselves. Some international students may have to adjust to the amount of individual responsibility they are expected to take for their academic problems, as they may be more accustomed to relying on others for problem resolution (Charles and Stewart, 1991). For example, international students are often unfamiliar with the convention of office hours and may perceive American teachers as uninterested in their problems because they are not accustomed to approaching their teachers directly with difficulties (N. Liakos, personal communication, March 25, 1992).

Another potential misunderstanding related to individual responsibility is what the American educational system sees as "cheating". Helping another individual during an exam may be judged differently in classrooms in other cultures, however. For example, a doctrine of Islam states that those who are more

fortunate should give to those who are less fortunate. In the classroom, then, "cheating" can be justified as enacting the doctrine: the ones who are more fortunate (those who know the answers) giving to those less fortunate (those who do not know the answers) (Kohls, 1981). Another example, from Soviet academic culture, is the unwritten rule between teachers and students in many classrooms that students make and bring cheatsheets to exams (C. Scanlan[3], personal communication, May, 1992). Our concept of cheating, therefore, may challenge some international students to change previous classroom practice.

2. Equality and Informality

Equality and informality are also values generally associated with Americans. The value of equality underlies the notion in America that education should be accessible to all rather than a select few (Althen, 1988). Althen (1983) mentions that some international students may perceive their American undergraduate counterparts as less prepared or able for university work. For instance, visiting Soviet business student Shekshnia (1991) felt that those in his MBA program did not need any special abilities, just a drive to work.

Traditional academic course planning and execution also reflects equality. Barnes (1984) describes the notion of "contract" between American teacher and students. This "contract" is the syllabus, which details course assignments, text and grading policies. The "contract" begins the first day of class and is referred to by both teachers and students to ensure that class

rules and obligations are met. Shekshnia (1991) perceived that American professors were very sensitive about the issue of grades. He felt that thinking a professor was not objective in grading was an accusation of "professional incompetence" and for this reason, a large amount of class time was spent explaining grading procedures and policies. In Soviet academic culture, teachers typically do not share the class plans in such detail with their students as in the U.S. (A. Morozova[4], personal communication, May 5, 1992).

Assessment in the American classroom is usually done over the course of the semester. Different kinds of exams, such as multiple-choice, open-book or essay, are used to secure fair assessment (Barnes, 1984). Regular attendance and class participation are also expected over the semester. Some international students are surprised at the pacing of coursework and how grades are not solely dependent on a final exam (Althen, 1983). Student Shekshnia (1991) remarked, "To people who are used to having everything decided by an end-of-the-semester examination, this simply boggles the mind..." (p. 88).

Because Americans ideologically value equality, they prefer to be informal with one another. For the most part, Americans are embarrassed by formal displays of respect (Althen, 1988). In academe, the teacher-student relationship can be puzzling for many international students (Barnes, 1984). American teachers' behaviors -- smiling, being open and friendly -- may indicate to some international students that the teacher-student relationship

is likewise open and free compared to the teacher-student relationship in their native countries. Shekshnia (1991) described the relationship as "devoid of any formality" and said that teachers and students "use first names", "pat each other on the shoulder, and get together for a few beers" (p. 87).

However, he did recognize that there were boundaries. As he wrote, "everyone knows how to keep his distance and not become dependent on each other" (p. 88). Other international students may be unaware that there are status differences, however, between teachers and students, although they are displayed in more subtle ways than in other cultures (Althen, 1988). Althen (1988) says that "people who are of higher status [are] more likely to talk longer, louder and first" (p. 9). The use of vocabulary and tone of voice as well as the use of narrative in academic discourse are ways in which status is displayed (Althen, 1988; Goodnow, 1990).

International students often expect to have the same social status as at home. In some other countries, being selected for graduate study is very prestigious. Students from those countries may experience a "loss of status" when they find themselves just one of many graduate students in a U.S. program, not given special attention by professors or others in the academic community (Brislin et al, 1986). International graduate students may also have difficulty in negotiating the relationship with their major professor and advisors, as social roles and boundaries may be unclear.

In addition, international students may lack an awareness of

the American idea of equal treatment of minorities and women in the classroom (Graham, 1992). Adjusting to American gender roles could be especially difficult for students from traditional societies (Peck, 1992). In asking for assistance, international students may be overly aggressive or otherwise offensive, as students may perceive that librarians, for example, are bureaucrats and are socially inferior (Peck, 1992).

3. Pragmatism and Reasoning Style

Americans can be characterized as pragmatic, future-oriented, critical, and direct in their reasoning style (Kohls, 1981). Americans focus on "doing" rather than "being" (Charles and Stewart, 1991) and are time rather than process-oriented.

The notion of the "point" in American academic discourse illustrates these ideas well. The "point" (or the main idea or purpose of a written or spoken message) should be stated clearly by the writer/speaker. In addition, a person should prove that his or her "point" is "true, accurate or valid" (Althen, 1988, p. 31). An opinion is not legitimated without facts especially numbers or statistics. Emotions are not legitimate sources for validating the "point", however, as noted before, those in academe with status use the narrative (Goodnow, 1990).

Moreover, the practical applications of information are valued by Americans. Some students may need to adjust to moving from theory to practice in the American classroom. Shekshnia (1991) mentioned this pragmatic orientation in the American MBA program in class projects in which students designed, marketed and sold

products. He expressed his surprise: "Can you imagine how wild it is for our shortage-tormented souls to have a two-hour discussion about what is the best packaging for deodorized socks--two or four to the package?!" (p. 85).

Manifestations of the American values of progress and criticism are the emphases on active class participation and critical thinking skills. American teachers do not assert to know everything about a subject (Althen, 1988). An Iranian student expressed initial surprise at an American teacher's response to not knowing the answer to a question:

> The first time my professor told me: "I don't know the answer--I will have to look it up," I was shocked. I asked myself, "Why is he teaching me?" In my country a professor would a give a wrong answer rather than admit ignorance. (Kohls, 1981, p. 11)

Students, for their part, are expected to challenge what teachers say (Althen, 1988). According to Althen, "students who do not ask questions may be considered uninterested or uncommitted" (p. 129). International students often have had different experience in how much knowledge they should display as students. In an interview with Bill Moyers (1989), Chinese physicist Chen Ning Yang commented: "As a child, you would be scolded if you pretended you knew a little bit more than you actually did" (p. 308).

Furthermore, American teachers and students are encouraged to participate equally in the learning process. Yang described how Chinese graduate students, accustomed to memorizing large amounts of material, are confused by the American idea of learning, which they see as learning by "osmosis". For Americans, learning is an

opportunity open to everyone. Althen (1988) depicts American learning:

> Learning at all levels is thus considered not just a process of memorizing as much as one can of a more or less fixed body of knowledge that already exists in books and in scholars' minds. Learning is an enterprise of exploration, experimentation, analysis and synthesis. Students can engage in those activities, in the American view, just as well as teachers and professors can (p. 58).

Thus, because of different ideas about the nature of learning and the learning process, international students may not realize the importance of being an active class participant in the American classroom.

An additional problem in participating in class is knowledge of classroom procedure. International students may be accustomed to different signals for getting the floor, backchanneling during a conversation (nodding, confirming "uh-uh"s) and maintaining eye contact while listening. In addition, students from some other cultures may feel they are under time pressure to answer questions and not given ample time to formulate a response before articulation (Anderson and Powell, 1988). So, while students may wish to participate they can be unsure of the rules in the American classroom.

Critical thinking skills are particularly important in doing independent library research (Peck, 1992). International students from cultures with strong oral traditions or from cultures in which memorization rather than criticism is encouraged would find the critical attitude expected in conducting research demanding. For instance, Yang said that Chinese students, after revering scholars

throughout their education, often have low self-confidence about their ability to make scholarly contributions. In problem-solving, for example, these students have a subconscious voice telling them to follow the rules and not to contradict what has been presented as the method to solve a problem (Moyers, 1990). Hence, international students may have to express critical and creative ideas for the first time.

Finally, Americans' time-orientation is evident in the classroom in the emphasis on deadlines and the belief that education can be measured in time rather than process (Anderson and Powell, 1988).

4. Philosophy of Knowledge

The American philosophy of knowledge is manifest in the educational system of the country and may pose some problems for some international students.

For instance, international students are sometimes associated with plagiarism (Brislin et al., 1986). Seen in a larger context, however, this problem seems to stem from a difference in cultural attitudes about the ownership of knowledge. In European-American culture, people are associated with knowledge. However, in some other cultures, knowledge is considered public domain and is not ascribed to the individual who thought it first. Indeed, some cultures feel it disrespectful to the author to alter the original words (N. Liakos, personal communication, March 25, 1992).

American educational principles may also surprise international students. For example, a basic American educational

principle is that people should have a general understanding of many disciplines (Althen, 1988). L. Spak[5] (personal communication, February 21, 1992) recounted how a Sri Lankan student refused to take the undergraduate breadth requirements outside his main field of engineering. While he had taken more than enough credits to complete a degree, this student never received his Bachelor's degree because he simply did not see the necessity of taking courses outside of his major field. Spak explained that he did not see the function of education like American educators do, i.e., to create well-rounded citizens. The student explained that in his home country "they" would only look at the courses he had taken in his field and not whether or not he had completed a degree. Similarly, international doctoral students may be surprised at the amount of coursework required prior to working on the dissertation (N. Liakos, personal communication, March 25, 1992).

Teaching Implications

We have explored several examples of cultural values and subsequent practices in American university culture and how international students may encounter difficulty adjusting to this culture. The problem for international students, then, is to become more "culturally literate" by achieving an awareness of these understanding assumptions and expectations of classroom and student conduct. By making the implicit cultural knowledge explicit in their instruction and providing opportunities to develop essential skills for university work, ESL practitioners can empower international students to develop necessary skills and

knowledge for their academic pursuits.

Winskowski-Jackson (1991) has suggested five important skills ESL students need for academic study:

(1) doing independent research
(2) using the library structure and system
(3) having the ability to participate in classroom discussions
(4) knowing the conventions of office hours
(5) being aware of American student-teacher roles

Students may also need exposure to time management for research and studying, an understanding of the writing process (notion of drafts, getting feedback) and encouragement to develop critical thinking skills. Rose (1992) has found in her ESL classes that pair and small group work, role plays and simulations, cooperative learning and calling on women they know an answer have been effective in getting female students to participate more actively in class. Some possible ESL class activities for teaching American university culture are listed on the following page.

Possible Class Activities for Teaching American Academic Culture

1. Discuss and Practice Skills Needed for American University Work.

Orient students to the library and research process, have them do independent work, work on time management and active class participation.

2. Expect and Explain American Classroom Practices.

Have the American assumptions of the classroom explicit on the syllabus, give examples of title pages and other expected formats for assignments. Also, give explicit procedures for gaining the floor and other classroom activities.

3. Ranking Activities of Values Across Cultures.

Have students rank or fill out a Likert scale comparing the American and their native country's values. Discuss the differences and how actions reveal these differences.

4. Talk About Differences in Dialogue Journals.

Use dialogue journals for cultural learning by writing to students about differences they have seen and experienced in America. Ask them to compare it with their expectations and home country's academic culture.

5. Panel of International Students for Q-A Session.

Arrange to have a group of international students (or former students) currently enrolled at a university form a panel discussion about American university culture.

6. Interviews of International Student Already in Academe.

Ask students to interview an international student who is enrolled in the university and discuss the adjustment difficulties. Students report to the class to form a list of common themes.

7. Observations of "Real" Classes, Lectures or Discussions.

Have students do observations lectures or discussions in their field and write a reflective essay or give a report to class. It may be possible for them to audit a class in their field of interest at a nearby university and report on the experience.

Conclusion

To aid in their adjustment to and achievement in the academic setting, international students need to become "culturally literate". Hirsch has said that cultural literacy does not mean agreeing with Western philosophers but rather being able to engage in discourse within a common frame of reference. In a similar vein, the purpose of attaining American university cultural literacy is not to convince international students of the supremacy of one educational system over another, but rather to offer them the advantage of conscious knowledge of the shared assumptions and practices in American academe to advocate their academic success.

Endnotes

1. Kira Ogorodnikova is a Russian instructor at the University of Maryland at College Park.

2. Nina Liakos is an ESL instructor at the Maryland English Institute at the University of Maryland-College Park.

3. Christopher Scanlan is a doctoral student in Slavic Languages and Literature at the University of Chicago.

4. A. Morozova is English Chair at Samara Teachers College in Novokybyshev, Russia.

5. Lori Spak is a former international student advisor at the University of Maryland-College Park.

Bibliography

Althen, G. (1983). The handbook for foreign student advising. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

Althen, G. (1988). American ways: a guide for foreigners in the United States. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

Anderson, J. and Powell, R. (1988). "Cultural influences on Educational Processes". In Samovar, L. and Porter, R., Intercultural Communication: A Reader. (pp. 207-211). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.

Barnes, G. A. (1984). The American university: a world guide. Philadelphia, PA: ISI Press.

Boyer, S. P. and Sedlacek, W. E. (1988). Noncognitive predictors of academic success for international students: a longitudinal study. Journal of College Student Development, 29, 218-223.

Brislin, R. W., Cushner, K., Cherrie, C. and Yong, M. (1986). Intercultural interactions: a practical guide. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Carter, R. T. and Sedlacek, W. E. (1986). Needs and characteristics of undergraduate international students. Journal of International Student Personnel, 3, 22-24.

Charles, H. and Stewart, M. A. (1991). Academic advising of international students. Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 19, 173-181.

Fletcher, J. F. and Stren, R. E. (1989). Language skills and adaptation: a study of foreign students in a Canadian university. Curriculum Inquiry, 19, 293-308.

Goodnow, J. J. (1990). Using sociology to extend psychological accounts of cognitive development. Human Development, 33, 81-107.

Graham, J. (1992). Bias-free Teaching as a Topic in a Course for International Teaching Assistants. TESOL Quarterly, 26, 3, 585-589.

Heikinheimo, P. S. and Shute, J. C. M. (1986). The adaptation of foreign students: student views and institutional implications. Journal of College Student Personnel, 27, 399-406.

Hirsch, E. D. (1987). Cultural literacy: what every American needs to know. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Kagan, H. and Cohen, J. (1990). Cultural adjustment of international students. Psychological Science: A Journal of the American Psychological Society, 1, 133-137.

Klineberg, O. and Hull, W. F. (1979). At a foreign university: an international study of adaptation and coping. New York: Praeger.

Kohls, L. R. (1981). Developing intercultural awareness. Washington, D.C.: The Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research.

Moyers, B. (1989). A world of ideas. New York: Doubleday.

Ostler, S. E. (1980). A survey of academic needs for advanced ESL. TESOL Quarterly, 14, 489-502.

Peck, S. S. (1992). International students and the research process. In Kaikai, S. and Kaikai, R. (Eds.) Understanding the international student. (pp. 89-105). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Rose, A. (1992). "'Unlearning to Not Speak' Adult Educators and the Female Learner." Adult Learning, Sept/Oct, 30-31.

Shekshnia, S. (1991). The American MBA program: a Russian student's view. Soviet Education, 33(12), 84-92.

Stewart, E. C. (1972). American cultural patterns: a cross-cultural perspective. Chicago, IL: Intercultural Press.

Storti, C. (1990). The Art of Crossing Cultures. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

Westwood, M. J. and Barker, M. (1990). Academic achievement and social adaptation among international students: a comparison groups study of the peer-pairing program. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 14, 251-263.

Winskowski-Jackson, C. (1991). Evaluation of culture components in ESL programs. In M. C. Pennington (Ed.), Building better English language programs: perspectives on evaluation in ESL. (pp. 98-117). Washington, D.C.: NAFSA: Association of International Education.

Xu, M. (1991). The impact of English-language proficiency on international graduate students' perceived academic difficulty.Research in Higher Education, 32, 557-570.

Ying, Y. and Liese, L. H. (1990). Initial adaptation of Taiwan foreign students to the United States: the impact of pre-arrival variables. American Journal of Community Psychology, 18, 825-845.